



Our Witness of Undividedness

Be ye undivided, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is undivided.

Matthew 5:48, paraphrased
by Jack Bernard in *How to Become a Saint* (Brazos Press, 2007)

A fellow congregant and I recently found ourselves in the midst of a furor at our children's middle school where, as parents, we serve on the "site council," the committee ostensibly responsible for overseeing the school's academic priorities and budget. Without warning or solicitation of community input, the district announced that a charter high school was going to be co-located at our facility, wresting away the entire third floor of our building. "This is an outrage!" cried the school community, my friend and I among the throng.

We soon learned that this closed-door decision stemmed from California's Proposition 39, a statewide ballot initiative that was promoted and bankrolled by Netflix Founder Reed Hastings, an ardent evangelist of the then-fledgling charter school movement. Proposition 39 had passed in 2000, and Hastings was appointed to head the California State Board of Education that same year. This confluence resulted in an educational reform policy that gave charter schools a huge legal boost: the power to demand and procure available building space within public school districts. In predictable fashion, this flawed policy pits charter schools against traditional schools in divisive fights for space.

Like all forms of sin, dividedness leads to dividedness, and a spirit of "us" versus "them" manifested itself in various ways at our school. For many, it was

easy to vilify the district administrators as cowards for kowtowing to demands of Proposition 39, written or not, for fear of lawsuit. For others, disdain arose for a principal who could have done more to defend his school. Between the two schools, reticence fostered an air of mutual suspicion. The middle school kids viewed the high school students as invaders. And district officials dismissed the parents as fearful, territorial, or small-minded. This last judgment was particularly offensive to those of us who, in the name of social justice, brought the fight directly to the local board of education.

All our pushing and striving, even when well intended, makes us aware of the dividedness within ourselves. As Christians, when in the midst of such "battles" as the one at my child's school, examining our motives serves to reveal the source of our hope. Once, in a moment

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of advocacy fatigue, I remember asking my late pastor, Bob Appleby, "How do I know if I'm investing more time and energy than is fruitful?" He responded with characteristic pastoral insight: "Well, are you hoping to bear witness...or to win?" This humbling question, which I remember finding difficult to answer at the time, required that I come to grips with the fact that I could be worshipping Christ with my lips while taking matters into my own hands. Lord, have mercy upon this divided heart!

The desire to receive God's mercy, in fact, sat at the heart of our church's recent "season of Jubilee," a significant moment in our history that provided an important alternative picture to the one that had played out at the school. Our pastors recognized that while, after 25

years of life together, there was much to celebrate, there were also debts to be forgiven, liens to be cancelled, accounts to be wiped clean. There were patterns of relating that had become lifeless or indeed destructive, whether between leaders and the general congregation, among members, or among the pastors themselves.

During a time of corporate confession, a subtle yet real divide was exposed—between those in the congregation who largely stood in judgment of others and those who had long ago gone into hiding for fear of judgment. Also exposed were the ways we had come to pigeon-hole each other, or indeed ourselves, a sin that resulted in squelching the wealth of gifts and testimonies we could offer to one another. Perhaps most importantly, we recognized ways we had become too certain about ourselves, our gospel, or what it means to be the church, ways that foster division not only within our own ranks but also from those who sit outside. We had to rekindle our first love, say yes to Jesus once again, and relearn what it means to be children in his presence—and in the world.

Such seasons of renewal remind us that a hopelessly divided world will remain without hope if we, the church, remain divided as well. Indeed, engagement in the world, as it is in the church, is more often than not messy and unpredictable. Nevertheless, despite our sin and flaws, we are called by Christ to be in these places. Set apart for Christ's purposes, trusting only in Christ, we are given grace to live miraculously undivided, a shining witness to a world yearning for unity. ■

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